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The Austerity Framework and semantic normativity

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Abstract. According to Herman Cappelen's Austerity Framework, conceptual engineering doesn't involve concepts, and barely involves engineering. I begin by raising two objections to the Austerity Framework as it stands: the framework cannot account for important normative aspects of conceptual engineering; and it doesn't give us an adequate response to Strawson-style objections that conceptual engineering serves only to change the subject. I then supplement the Austerity Framework with an account of semantic normativity, which builds on the speaker/semantic meaning distinction, and show that so-supplemented the Austerity Framework successfully overcomes the two objections. I tentatively conclude that semantic normativity should play a key role in how we understand conceptual engineering.

Key words: conceptual engineering; austerity framework; semantic normativity; limits of revision.

1. Introduction

Many concepts, it seems, are deficient. They may be insufficiently precise for theoretical inquiry, they may obscure important distinctions, they may be politically charged, or something else. To deal with this, one may seek to refine one's concepts. This is called *conceptual engineering*.

Here is a simple example.¹ On discovering that there are many rocky and icy objects with orbits and sizes quite similar to those of Pluto, including an object, Eris, more massive than Pluto, astronomers deemed the everyday concept of planet to be inadequate. The concept lacked an accepted definition, making it unclear whether the discovery of Eris constituted the discovery of a tenth planet. Eris, it seemed, was a borderline case. As such, astronomers voted on a new concept of planet to replace its predecessor—a concept that definitively excluded Eris, as well as Pluto and other similar objects. Call this the *Planet Case*.

According to Herman Cappelen’s *Austerity Framework* (2018), conceptual engineering doesn’t involve concepts, and barely involves engineering.² First, driven by concerns about the nature of concepts combined with an appeal to simplicity,³ Cappelen writes that “conceptual engineering should be seen as having as its goal to change extensions and intensions” (p. 61). Thus, in the Planet Case, the astronomers did not strictly speaking define a new concept to replace the old. Rather, they changed the intension and extension of the word “planet”. In what follows, I will call the intension and extension of a word or expression its *meaning*; and I will call the process whereby one seeks to change (and improve) the meaning of a word or expression *amelioration*.

Second, motivated by metasemantic externalism in the Kripke/Putnam tradition,⁴ Cappelen denies that we are generally in the position to *engineer* the meanings of our expressions—that is, to bring about the changes we want to make to intensions and extensions (pp. 61–84). Here, metasemantic externalism is the view that external factors—the environment, experts, complex patterns of use, etc.—are involved in determining the

¹ See Tyson 2009.

² Unaccompanied page numbers in what follows refer to Cappelen 2018.

³ E.g. pp. 141ff.

⁴ Kripke 1980; Putnam 1975.

meanings of expressions, in such a way that there is a genuine possibility that speakers are in massive error about those meanings. On this view, the mechanisms that result in changes of meaning are complex and, importantly, there is no algorithm for effecting such changes.

Cappelen thus endorses the following two claims:

Inscrutability: The processes involved in conceptual engineering are for the most part inscrutable.

Uncontrollability: For the most part, we lack control of the processes involved in conceptual engineering.

In the Planet Case, then, the astronomers were *not* able to control the intension and extension of “planet” simply by voting. If the astronomers’ efforts were nonetheless successful—i.e. if “planet” now has the meaning the astronomers voted for—then: by Inscrutability, it is unclear precisely what effected the desired changes; and, by Uncontrollability, the astronomers were to some degree *lucky* that their efforts were successful.

As it stands, the Austerity Framework faces at least two objections: it does not provide an adequate account of the normativity of conceptual engineering; and it does not successfully alleviate the concern that conceptual engineering serves only to change the subject. I believe, however, that both of these objections can be overcome if we build an account of semantic normativity into the Austerity Framework. To fully understand the process of conceptual engineering, so goes the thought, one must be sensitive to the competing norms guiding our use of language. Semantic norms are inherently conservative, guiding us away from amelioration, and on any given occasion the acceptability of amelioration turns on whether these semantic norms can be overridden. Or so, at least, I will argue.

2. Two Objections

2.1 *The Normativity Objection*

Cappelen claims that—despite Inscrutability and Uncontrollability—conceptual engineers “should keep trying” (p. 72). At face value, this is something of a surprise: if we can neither achieve, nor even see how in principle to achieve, something, then it might seem wise to turn our attention elsewhere. Cappelen responds to this with an analogy:

If you think your views and theories about crime in Baltimore or poverty in Bangladesh will have a significant or predictable effect on either, you’re extremely likely to be disappointed (and to end up feeling you’ve wasted the part of your life that has been devoted to these issues). [...] What I say about conceptual engineering [...] doesn’t make the activity of trying to engineer concepts much different from a wide range of other human efforts to think about how things should be. (pp. 200–201)

The idea, as I understand it, is as follows. We should *try* to reduce crime in Baltimore and poverty in Bangladesh, because *there should be* less crime in Baltimore and less poverty in Bangladesh. By analogy, we should *try* to ameliorate some of our expressions, because *those expressions should have* different intensions and extensions.

I have two points to make about this analogy. First, it fails to capture the full extent of the normativity involved in conceptual engineering. Consider the following claims:

- (1a) The astronomers were right to (re)define “planet”.
- (1b) Had the astronomers continued to use “planet” without (re)defining it, they would have been doing something wrong.

On the assumption that the astronomers were to continue using “planet” and given the unclarity over the status of Pluto and Eris, it seems that, in an appropriate sense, the astronomers were right to (re)define “planet” and would have been wrong not to. Here, the

appropriate sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ is not (say) moral or legal: the astronomers were not fulfilling a *moral* or *legal* requirement in (re)defining “planet” and then using the new definition. Rather, the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ seem to have a mixed prudential, epistemic and semantic flavour: the astronomers’ theoretical aims, the norms of inquiry and the norms governing language all seem to contribute to why they were right to act as they did. Exactly how these different norms contribute to (1a) and (1b) is something to be explored.

Consider also, and perhaps more controversially, the following:

- (2a) Having voted for the new definition of “planet”, the astronomers were right to treat “planet” as having that new definition—regardless of whether the astronomers had successfully changed the meaning of “planet”.
- (2b) Having voted for the new definition of “planet”, had the astronomers not treated “planet” as having that new definition, they would have been doing something wrong—regardless of whether the astronomers had successfully changed the meaning of “planet”.

Given that the astronomers had agreed upon a definition for “planet”, it seems that, in an appropriate sense, they were subsequently right to use “planet” accordingly, and would have been wrong not to. Here, for Cappelen, the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ cannot be *semantic*: given Uncontrollability, the astronomers cannot change the meaning of “planet” simply by a vote. Nonetheless, it is highly plausible that, in pursuit of good astronomical practice, astronomers ought subsequently to have used “planet” *as if* its meaning had been changed.

However, (1a)–(2b) go far beyond the very general normative claims that Cappelen considers. For example, to say that we (people in general) should try to reduce crime in Baltimore is *not* to say that any *particular* group of people would be wrong *not* to try to reduce crime in Baltimore. Moreover, on Cappelen’s analogy, the analogues of (2a) and (2b)

would just be bizarre. The analogue of (2a) might be as follows: were we to decide on what the new rate of crime in Baltimore should be, we would be right to treat crime in Baltimore as having that new rate. The analogue of (2b) might then suggest that we would be wrong *not* to treat crime in Baltimore as having that new rate. But any such claim would be absurd: we ought not to pretend that the crime rate is lower than it in fact is, because that is tantamount to ignoring the problem. So Cappelen's analogy does not help us to make sense of why the astronomers were right to treat "planet" as having the new definition, and would have been wrong not to. The upshot is this: if we understand the normativity in conceptual engineering simply in terms of Cappelen's analogy, then we underestimate the extent of that normativity.

The second point about the analogy is this. It is plausible that we *should* try to reduce crime in Baltimore and poverty in Bangladesh only because there seem to be *sensible strategies* to try. Crime in Baltimore might be reduced by improved training of police officers, or by a more strategic focus on the prevention of crime, or by increasing gun control, and so on. Poverty in Bangladesh might be reduced by improving the public services provided to the poorest regions, by increasing public investment in energy and infrastructure, by training its youth to create a generation of skilled workers, and so on. Of course, such strategies might fail or have other unforeseen consequences, but they are nonetheless sensible strategies to try to reduce crime in Baltimore and poverty in Bangladesh. If there were literally *nothing* sensible that we could do to try to achieve those goals, then it would not be clear that we *should* try. For example, while a world without crime would be wonderful, it is not plausible that we should try to eliminate *all* crime, because there is no sensible strategy for achieving such an aim. For it to be plausible that we *should* try to Φ , we require *some* sensible strategy to follow in trying to Φ .

However, as it stands, the Austerity Framework does not provide a strategy for ameliorating expressions. Inscrutability and Uncontrollability together suggest that we are

largely helpless with regard to the meanings of our expressions. And, while Cappelen does discuss some of the mechanisms that may underlie meaning shifts—such as a suitable intention in a ‘historical chain of submission’,⁵ or a change in the ‘dominant source of information’⁶—he acknowledges that these mechanisms provide “precious little guidance in particular cases” (p. 66). The worry is that, as things stand, the Austerity Framework does not make it plausible that we should even *try* to ameliorate our expressions.

Drawing these points together, then, the Normativity Objection is this. *Conceptual engineering is in part a normative enterprise, but the Austerity Framework as it stands fails to capture this: (a) insofar as the framework captures the normativity at all, it severely underestimates the extent of the normativity; and (b) without sensible strategies for effecting changes in intension and extension, it is unclear that the framework leaves room for any normativity in conceptual engineering at all.*

2.2 The Topic-Continuity Objection

Strawson (1963) famously objected that, in philosophy, Carnap’s (1950) method of explication serves only to change the subject.⁷ The objection generalises: whenever a conceptual engineer seeks to ameliorate an expression, there is a standing concern that she will only succeed in changing the subject.

Cappelen’s principal response is that sameness of topic is more coarse-grained than sameness of intension and extension (pp. 107–121). One can change the intension and extension of one’s expressions without thereby changing the topic. For example, even supposing that the astronomers successfully changed the intension and extension of “planet”,

⁵ This is Kripke’s (1980: 163) suggestion, quoted in Cappelen 2018: 65.

⁶ This is Evans’ (1973: 199–202) suggestion, mention in Cappelen 2018: 66.

⁷ See Pinder 2017a for further discussion of Strawson’s objection.

we don't think that the planetary sciences began in 2006: astronomers have been studying planets for hundreds of years, despite the fact that what counts as a planet has changed over that time. Of course, some changes in intension and extension *do* constitute a change of topic: someone who complains about the trolls on an internet message board is not discussing the same topic as someone who complains about the trolls in her game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Some changes of intension and extension constitute a change of topic; others do not.

For Cappelen, the key question is this: how much can an intension and extension change without resulting in a change of topic? Or, more succinctly: *What are the limits of revision?* Cappelen's answer is, effectively, that we should decide on an ad hoc basis what the limits of revision are. This is captured by the *Contestation Theory*:

there are no fixed rules for how far revision can go. The limits of revision are themselves up for revision, contestation, and negotiation. If there are any rules here at all, it's that we make up the rules along the way. (p. 116)

This theory is to be understood as normative: we *should* take the limits of revision to be itself up for revision, contestation and negotiation.⁸

The normative nature of the Contestation Theory is brought out by Cappelen's discussion of Railton.⁹ According to Railton, a topic is in fact preserved across a conceptual revision just if the concept's *job description* is preserved. Here is Cappelen's example of a 'Railton-style job description':

The job description of a concept, say "Freedom", has three components:

⁸ Cappelen suggests that, to give a descriptive account of the limits revision, we would need to study genealogies, i.e. conceptual histories. However, Cappelen argues that we are nowhere near being in the position to perform such studies. As such, I put his discussion of genealogies to one side. See pp. 117–118.

⁹ See Cappelen 2018: 120–121, and Railton 1993: 46.

- (i) Truistic claims about Freedom (e.g., it has something to do with agency, responsibility, volition, etc.)
- (ii) Paradigm instances of Freedom (e.g. *those* are instances of free acts)
- (iii) Inferential relations that Freedom figures in (e.g., *if some act reduces freedom, then it is—ceteris paribus—bad*). (p. 120)

Cappelen’s principal objection to Railton is that the proposal

seems to be the result of primarily armchair reflection by Railton himself. I don’t think we should trust our armchair assumptions about topic preservation. In order to propose a theory an enormous amount of careful empirical work is needed. Whether the topic has been preserved is not even in the neighbourhood of an a priori question. (p. 121)

Notice that, although Cappelen does not undertake careful empirical work in support the Contestation Theory, he objects to Railton’s theory precisely because it is not supported by empirical work. This is *not* a case of double standards, but a reflection of the different statuses of the two theories. Cappelen treats Railton’s theory as a descriptive theory about when, in fact, topics are preserved. Cappelen’s view is that we lack anything like the relevant data to determine whether Railton’s theory is true.¹⁰ In contrast, the Contestation Theory is a normative theory about how, going forward, we *should* decide whether the topic has been preserved. Thus, the Contestation Theory does not require support from careful empirical work. Rather, it is “a continuation of the fundamental spirit of conceptual engineering”, a “critical and questioning spirit [that] is naturally applied to the constraints on ‘sameness of topic’” (p. 119).

As a response to Strawson-style objections, however, this is inadequate. Accepting the Contestation Theory for the sake of argument, the standing concern raised above—that, in seeking to ameliorate an expression, one will only succeed in changing the subject—*remains*

¹⁰ See pp. 117–118.

a standing concern. The mere possibility of staying *within* the limits of revision, combined with the view that we *should* take those limits to be up for negotiation, does not alleviate the concern that one will ultimately go *beyond* the limits of revision.

Suppose, by analogy, that it is important to me that my article be considered for publication at a particular journal, and so it is important to me that the article fall *within* the journal's scope. Suppose, moreover, that I am genuinely concerned that my article might fall *beyond* the scope of the journal. Being told that we should take the limits of the scope to be up for revision, contestation and negotiation, or that the rules are made up along the way, will not alleviate my concern. The added uncertainty may even heighten it. To alleviate the concern, I need to have some grasp of the *kinds* of situation in which, if all goes right, articles will be deemed to fall within the scope; I need at least some grasp of whether we *should* take my article to fall within the scope. This is not to deny that what falls within the scope is essentially up for negotiation: it is to deny that merely acknowledging the fact is sufficient to alleviate the underlying concern.

Likewise, to adequately respond to a Strawson-style objection, we need more than to acknowledge that the limits of revision should be up for negotiation. Such an acknowledgement does not alleviate the concern that, in a given case, amelioration will change the subject. In addition, we need some grasp of the *kinds* of situation in which, if all goes right, amelioration will fall within the limits of revision; we need some grasp of whether, in a given case, we *should* take an amelioration to fall within the limits of revision.

The Topic-Continuity Objection, then, is this. *As it stands, the Austerity Framework does not provide us with the resources to overcome Strawson-style objections: it does not alleviate the concern that, if an individual seeks to adjust the intension/extension of an expression, she will only succeed in changing the subject.*

3. Semantic Normativity

I suggest that the Normativity and Topic Continuity Objections can be overcome by supplementing the Austerity Framework with an account of semantic normativity. Here, I will only briefly motivate and sketch the account of semantic normativity I have in mind.¹¹ Nonetheless, the account draws support from its utility in illuminating both the normative aspect of conceptual engineering, and the *kinds* of situation in which conceptual engineering should be taken to change the subject.

To begin, it will be useful to distinguish between two closely related suggestions about semantic normativity in the literature. According to the first, what a *speaker means by a word* has implications for how she ought to apply that word. According to the second, what a *word semantically means* has implications for how a speaker of that word ought to apply that word. For example, respectively:

(P₁) $S \text{ means } F \text{ by } w \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ ought not to (apply } w \text{ to } x) \leftrightarrow x \text{ is not } f)$

(P₂) $w \text{ means } F \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ ought not to (apply } w \text{ to } x) \leftrightarrow x \text{ is not } f)$

where S is a speaker, w is a word, F is its meaning, and f is the feature of an object in virtue of which w applies to that object.¹²

The distinction between speaker meaning and semantic meaning is familiar.¹³ I understand it along the following lines: *speaker meaning* is what a speaker intends to mean by her words; *semantic meaning* is the meaning assigned to the word by the speaker's

¹¹ The account was initially developed in 2013, in joint research with Thomas Richardson.

¹² The latter formulation is due to Whiting 2007, 2009. The former formulation is closer to Kripke's (1982) discussion of semantic normativity, and how Hattiangadi (2006, 2009) glosses Whiting's view. See Whiting 2016 for critical discussion of alternative accounts of the normativity of meaning.

¹³ See especially Grice 1989.

language. Here, we can assume that the speaker’s language is a *public* language, perhaps such as English or French or dialects thereof.¹⁴ Importantly, though, one can speaker-mean *F* by *w* regardless of whether *w* semantically-means *F* in one’s language. Here are some brief examples to illustrate:

- Anna momentarily forgets the word “carafe” at the dinner table and utters: “please can you pass me the thingamajig of wine?” Plausibly, Anna means *carafe* by “thingamajig”, although “thingamajig” has no specific meaning in her language.
- Kathryn often mixes up the names of her sister, Penny, and daughter, Claire. On one occasion, Kathryn tries to get Claire’s attention (and knows that it is Claire whose attention she is trying to get) and says “Penny! Claire! Claire!” Plausibly, Kathryn meant *Claire* by “Penny”, although “Penny” means *Penny* in her language.

In what follows, I simply assume that we can appeal to this intuitive distinction.

One might be tempted to object to (P₁) and (P₂) by questioning the strength of ‘ought’ as it features in those principles. One could certainly construct a scenario in which, intuitively, one ought to apply “gunpowder” to charcoal shards because, in doing so, one would thwart a terrorist’s attempts to build a bomb. But such worries are easily sidestepped.¹⁵ In (P₁) and (P₂), the ‘ought’ is to be understood as a strictly *semantic* ‘ought’—and, importantly, such an ‘ought’ might be overridden in various occasions by competing moral, legal, prudential and other ‘oughts’. With this qualification in place, such scenarios are handled easily.

¹⁴ This is fair, given that the Austerity Framework plausibly treats semantic meaning as belonging to public languages. For example, Cappelen takes it to be an empirical question whether the semantic meaning of an expression has changed, to be determined by detailed study of how the expression was/is used by different people. (See e.g. p.118. Cf. pp. 164f.)

¹⁵ See e.g. Whiting 2009: 546f.

Nonetheless, (P₁) and (P₂) are problematic for at least two reasons. First, they make lying—and speaking falsehoods more generally—a *semantic* mistake.¹⁶ Suppose that Arthur is trying to sell a fake *Rolex* watch. He holds it out and says “this is a Rolex”. Then Arthur’s use of “Rolex” contravenes both (P₁) and (P₂). “Rolex” means *Rolex*, Arthur means *Rolex* by “Rolex”, and the watch in Arthur’s hand is not a Rolex—so, by both (P₁) and (P₂), Arthur (semantically) ought not to apply “Rolex” to the watch in his hand. The problem here is that lying is not a *semantic* mistake. Meaning and speaking-the-truth aren’t connected in this way.¹⁷ Meaning has implications for *how* to use words truthfully, not whether we *ought* to. If I tell a child that “Rolex” denotes watches made by *Rolex*, I am not thereby saying that she ought to use “Rolex” truthfully. Of course, none of this is to deny that Arthur ought not to apply “Rolex” to the watch in his hand. The point is that it would be a misdiagnosis to say that the ‘ought’ in question is *semantic*.

Second, (P₁) and (P₂) fail to capture what I take to be intuitively clear-cut cases of semantic normativity.

Slip-of-the-Tongue: Sara is walking at dusk in Spring with a friend, and notices that the streetlights are coming on. She thinks to mention this to her friend. However, just then, she overhears some passers-by commenting that the leaves are turning green.

Acting upon her previous thought, Sara asserts “the leaves are coming on”.

Sara, here, is accidentally using “leaves” to mean *streetlights*. Given that “leaves” means *leaves*, this seems to be, at least in part, a *semantic* mistake. Given that Sara meant *the streetlights are coming on*, she *ought not* to have asserted “the leaves are coming on”; rather, she *ought* to have asserted “the streetlights are coming on”. Consider a second story:

¹⁶ Cf. Hattiangadi 2009

¹⁷ Cf. Wikforss 2001.

Wrong-Choice-of-Word: While marking an essay, Mike thought that the essay's structure was in chaos. When it came to writing feedback, he had to stop for a moment to remember the corresponding adjective, before writing in the feedback section: "the essay structure is inchoate".

Mike, here, is mistakenly using "inchoate" to mean *chaotic*. Given that "inchoate" means *inchoate*, this seems to be, at least in part, a *semantic* mistake. Given that Mike meant *the essay structure is chaotic*, he *ought not* to have written "the essay structure is inchoate"; rather, he *ought* to have written "the essay structure is chaotic".

Neither (P₁) nor (P₂) capture the 'oughts' in *Slip-of-the-Tongue* or *Wrong-Choice-of-Word*. According to (P₁), neither Sara nor Mike have made any mistake at all: Sara meant *streetlights* by "leaves" and Mike meant *chaotic* by "inchoate", so Sara was permitted to apply "leaves" to the streetlights and Mike was permitted to apply "inchoate" to the chaotic.

In contrast, (P₂) can attribute *a* mistake to Sara: as "leaves" means *leaves*, Sara ought not to have applied "leaves" to streetlights. But there are problems. First, (P₂) misdiagnoses Sara's mistake: Sara's mistake wasn't to apply "leaves" to non-leaves, it was to mean *streetlights* by a word that means *leaves*. Second, (P₂) may fail to predict that Mike is doing anything wrong at all: if the student's essay structure *is* inchoate (as well as chaotic), then (P₂) predicts that Mike's utterance is semantically in order. And, finally, (P₂) only prohibits: it tells us how words ought *not* to be used. However, in *Slip-of-the-Tongue*, Sara *ought* to have said "streetlights" rather than "leaves"; and, in *Wrong-Choice-of-Word*, Mike *ought* to have said "chaotic" rather than "inchoate".

Now, none of this constitutes a knockdown argument against (P₁) and (P₂). But it suggests that, *if* meaning is normative, we might do better to capture it with something like the following:

(P₃) e semantically-means m in S 's language $\rightarrow S$ ought to (S utters $e \leftrightarrow S$ speaker-means m)

Here, S is a speaker, e is a word, phrase or sentence, and m is a meaning. As before, the 'ought' is to be understood as strictly *semantic*—it can be overridden by moral, legal, prudential and other norms. Here are some examples:

- *Slip-of-the-Tongue*. In English, “the streetlights are coming on” means *the streetlights are coming on* and “the leaves are coming on” means *the leaves are coming on*. As such, given that Sara means *the streetlights are coming on*, she ought to utter “the streetlights are coming on” and she ought not to utter “the leaves are coming on”.
- *Wrong-Choice-of-Word*. In English, “the essay structure is chaotic” means *the essay structure is chaotic* and “the essay structure is inchoate” means *the essay structure is inchoate*. As such, given that Mike means *the essay structure is chaotic*, he ought to write “the essay structure is chaotic” and he ought not to write “the essay structure is inchoate”.
- *Rolex*. In English, “Rolex” means *rolex*. As such, he ought to: use “Rolex” if and only if he means *Rolex*. As he uses “Rolex” and means *Rolex*, he satisfies his semantic obligations.
- *Thingamajig*. In English, “thingamajig” has no meaning and “carafe” means *carafe*. As such, Anna ought to: use “carafe” if and only if she means *carafe*. As Anna means *carafe*, she ought to use “carafe”. (But, as “thingamajig” has no meaning, there is no independent semantic reason for her *not* to mean *carafe* by “thingamajig”.)

Before proceeding, let me make three points.

First, as it stands, (P₃) is overly simplified. For example, (P₃) will have to be developed to account for synonyms and expressions with multiple meanings. However, as a somewhat idealised model, (P₃) will serve our purposes in what follows.

Second, there are potential objections facing (P₃) that I cannot address here—such as how it deals with metaphor and other ‘creative’ uses of language. However, firstly, it is not clear that (P₁) or (P₂) can deal with metaphor as they stand, either. Secondly, allowing the account to appeal to a notion of *metaphorical meaning* may resolve the problem easily.¹⁸ And, thirdly, anyhow, it does not strike me as implausible that metaphor essentially involves contravening a semantic norm—good metaphors will nonetheless be justified on other (say aesthetic) grounds.

Third, although (P₃) officially generates a semantic ‘ought’, in some of what follows it will be convenient to talk of semantic *reasons*. I take these two ways of talking to be equivalent.

4. Resolving the Objections

I begin by explaining how to supplement the Austerity Framework with the above account of semantic normativity, before turning to the Normativity and Topic Continuity Objections.

4.1 Supplementing the Austerity Framework

To supplement the Austerity Framework with the above account of semantic normativity, we need first to supplement it with the semantic/speaker meaning distinction. This is straightforward, as the Austerity Framework is built upon an externalist metasemantics, and such metasemantic theories typically contain the distinction already. In particular, on

¹⁸ E.g. Skulsky 1986.

Kripke/Putnam-style externalism, the *semantic* reference of a word w is fixed by the underlying structure of the stuff that *speakers* refer to when using w . Nonetheless, it's worth spelling out in a little more detail how the distinction fits into the Austerity Framework.

- According to the framework, *meaning* consists of *intension* and *extension*. As such, we can understand the *semantic* meaning of an expression to consist of the intension and extension assigned to it by the relevant language. Likewise, what a *speaker* means by an expression consists of the intension and extension that the speaker *intends* the expression to have.
- Conceptual engineering targets *semantic* meaning. That is, conceptual engineers are seeking to change the intensions and extensions that are assigned to the relevant expressions by the relevant language. For example, the astronomers were trying to change the meaning of the word “planet” as used in (academic) English.
- The framework, as it stands, puts no specific constraints on what a *speaker* can mean by an expression. If a speaker can *intend* to mean m by “planet”, she can thereby mean m by “planet”. But, importantly, such a speaker is *not* thereby speaking a language in which “planet” means m .

With the speaker/semantic meaning distinction in place, we can now make a few comments about the implications of (P₃) for the Austerity Framework.

- When the semantic meaning of an expression changes, the semantic norms also change. If “salad” previously denoted only green-leaf dishes but now also denotes (say) mozzarella and tomato slices drizzled with olive oil, then speakers now ought to mean something broader by “salad” than what speakers ought to have meant by “salad” before the change.

- A conceptual engineer is, in effect, seeking to change the semantic norms. If one successfully changes the semantic meaning of an expression, one thereby changes what one ought to mean by that expression.
- Conceptual engineering will almost certainly involve *breaking* semantic norms. Conceptual engineers tend to change what they speaker-mean by the target expression immediately. But any change in semantic-meaning will almost certainly be a long-term, drawn-out affair. As such, even when amelioration is ultimately successful, there is likely to be a period during which conceptual engineers speaker-mean something by an expression that semantically-means something else. (I do not take this to be problematic: revolutions typically involve breaking norms to change those norms.)

4.2 Resolving the Normativity Objection

The Normativity Objection states that the Austerity Framework fails to account for the normativity in conceptual engineering. There are two aspects to this. First, there are particular normative claims—such as (1a)–(2b)—that the Austerity Framework is not well placed to capture. Second, as the framework does not currently provide sensible strategies for amelioration, it is not clear that it leaves room for any normativity in conceptual engineering at all.

I take the two aspects in reverse order. First, then, we need a strategy for effecting changes in semantic meaning. Given the account of semantic normativity I have been sketching, I think that there is an obvious strategy. Notice three things. Firstly, given (P₃), to change the semantic-meaning of an expression is to change what one semantically-ought to mean in using that expression. Secondly, what one semantically-ought to mean by an expression is typically tied closely to what other speakers in the community typically mean

by that expression. Thirdly, the more that a speaker notices others using an expression to mean *m*, the more likely she is to use that expression to mean *m*. All of this suggests the following strategy:

The Prominent Usage Strategy. In order to change the semantic meaning of *e* to *m*, one might seek to mean *m* by *e* as widely and prominently as possible.

This, I suggest, is a sensible strategy: wide, prominent uses of *e* in which the speaker means *m* are more likely to encourage others to use *e* similarly, which is more likely to lead to *e* coming to semantically mean *m*.

Two points of clarification. Firstly, I do not claim that the Prominent Usage Strategy is a strategy with a high, or even moderate, success rate. In fact, I would expect almost all uses of the Prominent Usage Strategy to fail. Most people just do not hold much sway over others; those who *do* hold sway are not in control of precisely how others use their words; and other external factors (e.g. the microstructure of natural kinds) which no one controls are also involved in the determination of semantic meaning. However, all of this is just to say that the strategy is compatible with the Austerity Framework, and with Inscrutability and Uncontrollability in particular. Nonetheless, for those seeking to ameliorate an expression, the Prominent Usage Strategy is a *sensible* strategy to follow. It is, as it were, a good starting point.

Secondly, the strategy assumes that we are in control of what we mean by our expressions. From the perspective of the Austerity Framework, this may be an idealisation: external factors may also be involved in determining mental content and, in particular, the content of our *intentions to mean things*. Nonetheless, I take it that we have *greater* control over speaker meaning than semantic meaning—and that is all that is required for the Prominent Usage Strategy to be a sensible strategy.

Given the Prominent Usage Strategy, it is plausible to say that conceptual engineers ‘should keep trying’—although ameliorating an expression will be extremely difficult, we have at least a *strategy* for amelioration. This makes room for normativity in conceptual engineering: we should try to ameliorate our concepts in broadly the same sense that we should try to reduce crime in Baltimore and lessen poverty in Bangladesh. As things stand, however, this does not yet capture the full extent of normativity in conceptual engineering.

So let me now explain how we can account for (1a)–(2b). First, recall (1a–b):

- (1a) The astronomers were right to (re)define “planet”.
- (1b) Had the astronomers continued to use “planet” without (re)defining it, they would have been doing something wrong.

Prior to amelioration, “planet” had no clear intension and an extension with prominent borderline cases. Call the semantic meaning of “planet” prior to amelioration m_{OLD} . The astronomers had good *theoretical* reason not to mean m_{OLD} by “planet”, despite a conflicting *semantic* reason to mean m_{OLD} by “planet”. Plausibly, given the strength of the theoretical reason, the astronomers had *overriding* reason to mean by “planet” something *other* than m_{OLD} . However, this would have led to astronomers violating a semantic norm—by (P₃), they semantically ought to mean m_{OLD} by “planet”. This violation could be avoided by (re)defining “planet”—so the astronomers were *right* to try to (re)define “planet”. This serves to explain (1a) and (1b).

Now recall (2a–b):

- (2a) Having voted for the new definition of “planet”, the astronomers were right to treat “planet” as having that new definition—regardless of whether the astronomers had successfully changed the meaning of “planet”.

(2b) Having voted for the new definition of “planet”, had the astronomers not treated “planet” as having that new definition, they would have been doing something wrong—regardless of whether the astronomers had successfully changed the meaning of “planet”.

The purpose of voting for a new definition of “planet” was ultimately to *change* the semantic meaning of “planet”—which, I will assume, the astronomers had good reason to try to do.

Call the meaning the astronomers voted for m_{NEW} . So, having voted for m_{NEW} , the astronomers had good reason to try to *change* the semantic meaning of “planet” from m_{OLD} to m_{NEW} .

Perhaps the clearest strategy for effecting this change is the Prominent Usage Strategy. This involves meaning m_{NEW} by “planet”—which is to treat “planet” as meaning m_{NEW} . So, the astronomers plausibly had good reason to treat “planet” as having the new definition *regardless* of the semantic meaning of “planet”. All things considered, then, in attempting to *change* the semantic meaning of “planet”, the astronomers were right to *break* the semantic norm to use “planet” to mean m_{OLD} and to, instead, use “planet” to mean m_{NEW} —and, likewise, the astronomers would have been wrong *not* to do this. This serves to explain (2a) and (2b).

The explanations above are tentative. This is because the Planet Case is complex. Nonetheless, I think that the explanations are highly plausible, and accurately reflect the complexity of the case. I said in §2.1 that the astronomers’ theoretical aims, the norms of inquiry and the norms governing language all seem to contribute to why they were right to act as they did. This point is borne out, I think, by the explanations above.

4.3 Resolving the Topic-Continuity Objection

The Topic-Continuity Objection is that the Austerity Framework, as it stands, fails to alleviate the concern raised by Strawson-style objections—the concern that amelioration will simply change the subject.

To begin note that, plausibly, we should *not* take astronomers to have changed the subject by ameliorating “planet”: we should not take the planetary sciences to have begun in 2006. Here is a conjecture about why the astronomers’ amelioration seems appropriate: the astronomers’ theoretical reason to mean m_{NEW} by “planet” outweighed their semantic reason to mean m_{OLD} by “planet”. If this is right, then the astronomers were right to seek to change the meaning of “planet” to m_{NEW} . Had their theoretical reason *not* outweighed their semantic reason, then the astronomers ought instead to have introduced a *new* term by which to mean m_{NEW} . Intuitively, this marks a normative difference between topic continuity and changing the subject: if you are continuing on the same topic, then you ought to use the same word; but if you are changing the topic, then you ought to introduce a new word.

Before generalising the suggestion, an important clarification is in order. I have suggested that we should not take the astronomers to have changed the subject because their *theoretical* reason outweighed their *semantic* reason. What is the significance of their reason being *theoretical*? Consider the following points.

- Expressions typically have different (semantic) meanings in different areas of discourse. “Valid argument” means one thing in philosophy, another thing in everyday language.
- Whether we should take amelioration to count as a change of subject may depend on the area of discourse. For example, perhaps we should take an explicit (re)definition of “human right” in terms of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to constitute a change of subject in (academic) philosophy, but not in politics. Similarly, perhaps we should take the astronomers to have preserved the subject in *astronomy*, but to have changed the subject in *astrology*.
- Suppose the semantic meaning of e is successfully changed to m . Whether we should take this to be a change of subject in an area of discourse is likely to depend on

whether the discourse-appropriate reason for meaning m by e outweighs the relevant semantic reason. Plausibly, the astronomers' reason for meaning m_{NEW} by “planet” was appropriate for astronomy, but not for astrology.

Exactly *how* to understand a ‘discourse-appropriate reason’ is not something I can explore here. But, at an intuitive level, the idea is reasonably clear: philosophical reasons are discourse-appropriate to philosophy; scientific reasons are discourse-appropriate to science; theoretical reasons are discourse-appropriate to inquiry more generally; political reasons are discourse-appropriate to politics; and so on.

We can now generalise the idea.

The Topic-Continuation Thesis. Suppose that one seeks to ameliorate e , changing its semantic meaning from m_{OLD} to m_{NEW} , in area of discourse D . Then we *should* count an amelioration as preserving the topic in D iff one's D -appropriate reason for meaning m_{NEW} by e outweighs the semantic reason for meaning m_{OLD} by e .

This, I suggest, provides us with an understanding of the *kinds* of situation in which we should count amelioration to fall within the limits of revision.¹⁹

Where does this leave the Contestation Theory? As Cappelen does not spell out the theory in detail, I am not sure. But I take it that, in many cases, it will be to some extent up for negotiation whether (i) a reason is D -appropriate and (ii) one reason outweighs another. As such, at the very least, the Topic-Continuation Thesis is offered in the *spirit* of the Contestation Theory—regardless of whether they are compatible.

¹⁹ Something like the Topic-Continuation Thesis underlies my ‘explication defence of arguments from reference’ (2017b), although I had not formulated the thesis at that time.

5. Conclusion

I have argued for supplementing the Austerity Framework with an account of semantic normativity. This move is important, I think, because conceptual engineering is a *normative* enterprise, and so *semantic* norms have an important role to play in understanding the enterprise. The aim of conceptual engineering is not merely to change language, but to make it better. However, one's reason for improving language come into conflict with pre-existing semantic norms. Understanding the interplay between these norms is, I suggest, key to understanding conceptual engineering. For this reason, with regard to the kind of points I have made, there is nothing special about the Austerity Framework. Semantic normativity should play a key role in how we understand conceptual engineering.²⁰

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